

BITING

One of the most undesirable but unfortunately normal behaviours that some young children engage in, especially during the second and third years of life, is biting. Having a biter in a group of young children causes stress and tension, and being the parent of a biter or a child who has been bitten is very distressing. Of course, so is being bitten. In fact, if you think about it, biting is a way of hurting that does not depend on size and physical strength. That is, a baby or toddler can inflict a bite that breaks the skin and is extremely painful.

This means that biting is a behaviour that adults are eager to find a “quick fix” or sure-fire way to eliminate. Unfortunately, there isn’t one. However, biting does demand our most effective and powerful disapproval. At the same time, it is important not to react to biting as we would if an older child or adult bit. Although we would expect an over three year old to have enough self control and understanding to avoid biting, babies and toddlers may not.

Try to figure out the cause of biting. Ask yourself; Is the child biting because of:

- tiredness?
- frustration caused by too much structure or too many challenges?
- over stimulation from too much noise, too much going on?
- teething, causing a need to bite down on something?
- the powerful and strong reaction it causes?
- boredom?
- excessive excitement, the child being out of control?
- the child experimenting with various ways of getting what she wants, and not knowing this is a hurtful and inappropriate way?

While there are no foolproof solutions, once the adults have an idea of what might be causing the biting, efforts can be made to reduce or eliminate it. Some suggestions are:

- Ensure that there is sufficient space so that children can spread out and have opportunities to be safely alone or with one other child.
- Make available a rich variety of appropriate materials and equipment for children to choose from.
- Ensure that there are enough sensitive and skilled adults to help children get along with each other.
- Be close by when there is a child in the group who is biting.
- Make sure that there are “moments of peace and quiet” during the day.
- Offer choices and try to avoid forcing all children to do the same thing at the same time.
- Never model “pretend biting”, even in playfulness.
- Be consistent in showing strong disapproval of biting.
- Ensure that you have teething toys for babies who are getting teeth.
- Remember that the child who is biting needs our support and good will as much as the child who has been bitten.
- Work in a supportive collaborative way with parents to minimise biting.

An excellent resource on biting is a book called *No Biting: Policy and Practice for Toddler Programs* by Gretchen Kinnell (Australian version by Pademelon Press, Sydney, 2002). In spite of its title, it does not tell you how to eliminate biting but gives sound advice about dealing with it.

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